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Social Media and Symbolic Action: Exploring Participation in the Facebook Red Equal Sign Profile Picture Campaign

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This study investigates symbolic action on popular social media platforms by empirically exploring the subjective experiences and motivations of participants in an exemplary campaign. Previous debates regarding the relationship between symbolic action and more traditional forms of political participation suggest a binary between up-the-ladder “civic culture” engagement and down-the-ladder “slacktivism.” Interviews with participants in the Facebook red equal sign profile picture campaign for marriage equality provide some evidence to support the former (particularly in terms of building an identity-focused political movement), and comparatively little to support the latter. However, a third model suggests how sympathetic citizens who would not otherwise take on organizational commitments are brought into the circle of participation by contributing to aggregate projects of mediated public advocacy.

Keywords: Activism, Politics, Social Practice, Qualitative.

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Introduction

In the past decade, a wealth of political expression and discussion has inundated popular social media platforms that are typically associated with peer socializing and entertainment, yet the significance of these activities for the broader political sphere has not been immediately clear. Certain types of peer-to-peer digital practices have been identified as more-or-less extended versions of traditional forms of political participation, such as lobbying public officials and organizing face-to-face rallies and protests (Earl & Kimport, 2011). However, the more expressive and symbolic strands of social media-based political discourse, such as posting politically themed images and videos on one's personal feeds and profiles, have a more ambiguous status. Bucy and Gregson (2001) classify citizen-level expression via interactive platforms more broadly as “media participation,” emphasizing that such symbolic activity is separate and distinct from material political participation. According to the authors, those who engage in media participation may “derive social and psychological rewards” such as enhancing social status and increasing a personal sense of political efficacy, although “involvement at this level typically has little direct influence over policy outcomes.” (p. 373). Yet by allowing for “open-mike access

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to a wide audience” (p. 375), media participation seems to hold the promise of empowering citizens to influence their peers and thus contribute to broader public advocacy efforts that may in fact have real, if indirect, macrolevel policy effects.

The indeterminate impact of such symbolic activities has led to much skepticism among those who are concerned that traditional political participation may be devolving on the internet into a weakened “slacktivism” (see Christensen, 2011). At the same time, the participatory culture fostered by peer-to-peer digital media has been more broadly celebrated for its potential to strengthen civic identity and engagement and pave the way for future democratic participation (e.g. Dahlgren, 2009). While the present study does not seek to adjudicate this ongoing debate, it aims to move theory-building forward by examining the complex and multifaceted reasons why social media users choose to participate in social media-based symbolic actions whose political and cultural effects are still far from being fully understood.

Specifically, this exploratory qualitative study investigates a prominent trend that has appeared in recent years on platforms like Facebook involving the posting of politically themed profile pictures. Previous research on social media profile pictures has tended to focus exclusively on issues of self-presentation through the selection of portrait photographs (e.g. Hum et al., 2011). More generally, boyd (2007) likens the social networking profile to a “digital body where individuals must write themselves into being” (p. 129), emphasizing the construction of identity in everyday social interaction. While the act of posting politically themed profile pictures can be assumed to contain elements of personal identity construction and impression management (echoing Bucy and Gregson’s [2001] assertion that media participation leads to rewards of enhancing social status), additional layers of motivation may also be at play. Indeed, large-scale coordinated profile picture-changing campaigns that focus on publicizing specific political and social issues have become common on Facebook in recent years, with perhaps the most high-profile example being the 2013 campaign to display support for same-sex marriage by posting images of red equal signs (e.g. Milano, 2013). While the red equal sign profile picture campaign (hereafter referred to as the RESPP campaign) garnered much speculation in the press regarding its political meaning and impact (e.g. Moylan, 2013), the subjective experiences and motivations of those who participated in the campaign have yet to be systematically explored.

The present study features in-depth interviews with 22 U.S. adult Facebook users who posted red equal sign images as their profile picture during the course of the 2013 campaign, and seeks to unpack how they conceptualize this practice as well as how they contextualize it within a broader range of online and offline politically-oriented activities. While measuring the macrolevel effects of the RESPP campaign lies outside the scope of this exploratory study, my goal is to draw upon a rich set of qualitative empirical data to advance the theorization of social media-based symbolic action, as well as to situate it more clearly in the conceptual models provided by the growing literature on politics and social media practice.

Social Media, Civic Engagement, and Political Participation

The rise of popular social media platforms in the early 21st century such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube has coincided with a conceptual shift in digital democracy scholarship, moving from a virtual public sphere model of formalized rational deliberation (e.g. Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001) to a more culturally situated model of engagement that centers on “the self-actualized networking of citizens engaged in lifestyle and identity politics” (Loader & Mercea, 2011, p. 758). This is likely attributable to the fact that unlike early experiments in online deliberative democracy that failed to live up to lofty expectations (see Wilhelm, 2000), social media platforms like Facebook integrate politically themed expression and discussion into a broader sphere of sociocultural interaction that is also characterized by entertainment,

status-seeking, and peer-socializing activities. In what Mascheroni (2013) calls “the cultural turn in the literature on the relationship between media and political engagement” (p. 112), a new set of theoretical constructs have emerged such as “civic cultures” (Dahlgren, 2009), and “subactivism” (Bakardjieva, 2009) that account for how everyday popular practices on networked digital media platforms can bring citizens into contact with the political in new and potentially empowering ways.

According to Dahlgren (2009), digitally networked communicative practices in casual cultural spaces have the capacity to foster a shared sense of civic identity that forms the preconditions for more material and organizationally oriented forms of political participation. This optimistic view of online civic engagement as a foundational step towards increased participation in the political sphere is echoed by Bakardjieva’s (2009) notion of “subactivism,” which posits that everyday processes of moral and political self-identification cultivated by online interaction create a “major reservoir of civic energy” (p. 103) that can be potentially tapped by both social movement organizations and formal political institutions. To illustrate what such a pathway from online civic engagement to political participation can look like, Mascheroni (2013) describes a Facebook group created by the Italian anti-Berlusconi organization Popolo Viola that provided like-minded citizens with

a sense of belonging to a network, a perceived common identity symbolized by the purple color, shared meanings, values, and practices. These civic cultures may lack a formal and long-term structure, but are effective at mobilizing people, as the recurrent demonstrations, rallies and mobs called by the Violas show (p. 107).

Thus, Mascheroni posits that the sense of community shored up within the everyday cultural spaces of Facebook served as a first step towards organized activism. Dovetailing with Bucy and Gregson’s (2001) claim that symbolic media participation “socializes citizens to participate in public affairs, and allows voters to cultivate a civic identity” (p. 375), such a perspective asserts that culturally situated sites of online interaction should be recognized as potentially significant in an expanded definition of political participation (see also Carpentier, 2011).

However, while this so-called ‘culturalist’ scholarship tends to frame networked digital discourse as an identity-building step towards future organizational participation in the political sphere, another strand of scholarship suggests how citizen-level discourse may itself constitute an instrumental form of political participation when it takes on a persuasive character. For instance, in the context of ‘get out the vote’ campaigns, an experimental network analysis of Facebook found that the peer-to-peer circulation of persuasive voting messages resulted in a statistically significant increase in real-world voting behavior, particularly when the messages came from connections identified as ‘close friends’ (Bond et al., 2012). At a more conceptual level, Castells (2007) argues that “power relations are structured nowadays in a global network and played out in the realm of socialized communication,” and social actors who wish to make an impact on these power relations must therefore “enter the battle over the minds by intervening in the global communication process” (p. 249). In other words, as the political sphere becomes increasingly inscribed within the circuits of mediated discourse, persuasive mediated communication can be understood as an increasingly material and instrumental form of political participation. Castells (2007) further suggests that the internet may serve as the “most potent political weapon” for new social movements due to its capacity to circulate alternative media messages that can influence public opinion, a practice that he refers to as “symbolic direct action against the sites of power” (p. 250).

The persuasive dimension of networked digital discourse can be recognized most clearly in the recent trend of social media-based campaigns launched by social movement activists and other political groups. As Loader and Mercea (2011) note, these various organizations have “adopt[ed] the commercial model

of social media as a means to target consumers” in order to “spread their ideas and attract recruits” (p. 761). However, rather than simply use social media as a one-way marketing platform to influence certain sectors of the public, political groups are increasingly drafting their supporters into service as nodal distribution agents to further spread the message across social networks, often adding their own personalized variations in the process. Surveying the landscape of recent activist movements, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) conclude that “whether we look at PPF [Put People First], Arab Spring, the Indignados, or Occupy, we note surprising success in communicating simple political messages directly to outside publics using common digital technologies such as Facebook or Twitter” (p. 742). Significantly, these groups “put the public face on the individual citizen ... through easy-to-share images and personal action frames” (p. 758).

One of the most high-profile examples of such efforts is the KONY 2012 campaign created by the advocacy group Invisible Children, which involved the coordinated circulation of a video promoting the struggle against Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony. In his analysis of the campaign, Zuckerman (2012) points to how it epitomizes what he calls an increasingly popular “cultural theory of change” that aims to “slowly win over the hearts and minds of millions” through the production and circulation of persuasive media artifacts. Zuckerman contrasts this with the more traditional “legislative theory of change” that focuses on directly influencing public officials through practices such as lobbying and petitioning, and suggests that younger citizens who have grown up with the internet may be more inclined to participate in the former over the latter: “once we have the ability to create and share our own information, we create and spread media to promote the causes we care about.” This notion of the “cultural theory of change” succinctly captures the widespread popularization of the position that symbolic media participation constitutes a privileged form of political participation due to its potential capacity to influence public opinion—and, in turn, political outcomes.

While this sort of approach comports with Castells’ (2007) vision of a fully media-saturated political sphere that plays out in a battle of the public mind, it is also quite controversial. In particular, social media-based advocacy campaigns such as KONY 2012 that focus primarily on sharing symbolic artifacts like video clips and images have been subjected to charges of “slacktivism” (e.g. Babu, 2012), a critique that is inherently skeptical of the political efficacy of this sort of activity. As Christensen (2011) explains,

this critique is aimed at low effort activities that are considered incapable of furthering political goals as effectively as traditional forms of participation. Wearing badges is not enough, and neither is changing your profile picture on your Facebook account for a day, a week, or a month. The slacktivists are seen as unwilling to get their hands dirty and do the efforts required to actually achieve these goals.

As Christensen notes, the chief concern of the “slacktivism” critique is not just that these symbolic actions may be ineffective in creating political change by way of influencing public opinion, but furthermore that it may detract from more traditional forms of organized political action such as lobbying and face-to-face protesting by providing an easy and self-satisfying alternative. Christensen’s review of the empirical literature on civic engagement and Internet use more broadly leads him to conclude that “there is no evidence that Internet activities are damaging civic engagement by replacing more effective forms of participation.” On the other hand, Fenton and Barassi (2011) offer some provisional support of what Christensen calls the “substitution thesis” in their study of the role of social media among British trade union activists; the authors note that many leaders of these activist groups “believed that political participation on social networking sites distorted people’s understanding of collective action, by reinforcing the idea that simply joining a Facebook Group was enough” (pp. 186–7).

Thus, the very same online political activities that have been celebrated as strengthening collective identity and providing a foundation for future political participation (Dahlgren, 2009; Bakardjieva, 2009) have also been criticized as threatening political participation by privileging self-satisfying individual expression at the expense of organized action. When framed as creating the preconditions for future civic engagement, social media-based political discourse inspires much optimism from digital democracy scholars; when framed as potentially efficacious participation in a struggle to “slowly win over the hearts and minds of millions” (Zuckerman, 2012), however, it becomes more vulnerable to pessimism over the possible disengaging and disempowering effects of individualized online expression (e.g. Fenton & Barassi, 2011).

Such ambiguity is heightened by the fact that scholars still know very little about what motivates citizens to participate in symbolic social media-based campaigns and how they themselves understand their activities (i.e. as building and strengthening their own political identity, as influencing their peers, as enhancing a sense of self-satisfaction, etc.). The present study works to fill this gap by examining the experiences and motivations of citizens who participated in a social media-based campaign that centers primarily on symbolic action and that has unsurprisingly become a focal point of current “slacktivism” debates—the RESPP campaign. While measuring the macrolevel effects of this campaign (in terms of shifting public opinion or inspiring other forms of activism) is not feasible for this kind of exploratory qualitative study, my goal is to tease out the subjective contours of participation in such a way as to aid conceptual development regarding this complex set of issues.

The Red Equal Sign Profile Picture (RESPP) Campaign

On 25 March 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court began to hear oral arguments for the Proposition 8 and Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) cases regarding the constitutionality of laws banning same-sex marriage. The LGBT advocacy organization Human Rights Campaign (HRC) responded by asking its supporters to show their support for marriage equality during the hearings by changing their profile pictures to a simple image of an equal sign on a red background symbolizing love (a variation of the group’s standard blue-and-yellow logo). The resulting social media campaign was widely perceived as a runaway ‘viral’ success, although the precise extent of participation is unknown. One report claims that “more than 10 million Facebook and Twitter users changed their avatars to a red equal sign in support of marriage equality” (Fitzpatrick, 2013), while a document released by Facebook noted a 2.7 million increase in profile picture changes on March 26 (the day after the HRC posted its announcement), which may represent the number of people who adopted the image on Facebook in the first day of the campaign alone (Bakshy, 2013).

In the press and the blogosphere, the widespread uptake of the RESPP campaign touched off the latest round in the growing public debate over the value of symbolic action on popular digital platforms like Facebook. In a typical press report covering the campaign, *ABC News* noted that public reaction was characterized by skepticism, particularly in terms of the campaign’s questionable ability to directly impact the Supreme Court hearings; for instance, one mocking tweet was quoted as reading “Just got off the phone with #scotus justice Scalia. Said he was going to vote no until he saw all the red profile pictures on FB. #pointless” (Milano, 2013). Along similar lines, an editorial from the youth-oriented news outlet *Vice* dismissed the campaign as “just another form of passive activism that isn’t advancing the cause,” and beckoned marriage equality supporters to “do some actual work . . . instead of downloading an image and clicking a few buttons” (Moylan, 2013). On the other end of the spectrum, some commentators mounted a spirited defense of the RESPP campaign as a significant form of political action, suggesting a variety of effects including subtly shifting public opinion in favor of marriage equality in a way that

“made it easier for [Supreme Court Justice] Kennedy to write the opinion he wrote” (Fitzpatrick, 2013). However, despite the wealth of positive and negative commentary and speculation that followed in the wake of the RESPP campaign, there has yet to be a systematic attempt to understand what drove people to participate, how they framed the nature of their activity, and how they perceived it in relation to other forms of politically oriented activity in online and offline contexts.

Following from the above discussion, the present study seeks to explore these questions:

RQ1: To what extent do RESPP campaign participants frame their participation as an attempt to influence public opinion on the issue of marriage equality, and if they do frame it as persuasive, how do they understand it to be potentially effective?

RQ2: To what extent do RESPP campaign participants frame their participation as helping to build a collective identity around support for marriage equality?

RQ3: How do RESPP campaign participants contextualize the campaign in relation to other forms of political participation, and do they see their participation as encouraging or discouraging other forms of action?

Method

To empirically explore the motivations and experiences of RESPP campaign participants, I conducted 22 in-depth, semistructured qualitative interviews. Respondents were recruited directly through Facebook by using a combination of snowball and maximum variation sampling techniques (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, pp. 112–116). I began by posting study announcements to my own Facebook Friends (of which I have approximately 580) that included a request to repost to their respective social networks on the site. Reflexively speaking, this choice reflects my own social and cultural position as a U.S. adult Facebook user who is connected to a large number of politically progressive and LGBT users. All U.S. Facebook users over the age of 18 who met the criteria of having ever posted a red equal sign as their Facebook profile picture were invited to be interviewed; however, in order to minimize interviewer bias, I excluded anyone whom I know personally. Thus, the respondent pool was limited to second and third-degree Facebook connections with which I had no prior familiarity. The study announcement was reposted on Facebook by friends and friends of friends over two dozen times, expanding the recruitment pool to hundreds, if not thousands, of second- and third-degree connections.

While this sampling strategy has obvious limitations and is not intended to be generalizable, I sought to maximize variation by purposively selecting volunteers who differ from one another in a number of key respects (i.e. gender, age, race/ethnicity, and geographic location in the US). Approximately 32 Facebook users initially contacted me and offered to be interviewed, although some of these volunteers were declined due to their demographic similarity with others in the respondent pool. For instance, after the recruitment announcement was shared on Facebook by a student at a North Carolina law school, I received 5 interview offers from students who attend this institution; in the interest of maximizing variation and limiting homogeneity in terms of geography and age, I chose to only interview two of these volunteers. In addition, there were initially more female interview volunteers than male, so I chose to limit the number of female respondents so that both male and female voices would be equally represented in the sample.

The resulting group of 22 respondents included 11 males (including one transgender male) and 11 females (including one transgender female). Interestingly, 9 of the 11 females identified themselves as heterosexual and 9 of the 11 males identified themselves as homosexual, suggesting that straight women and gay men may have been particularly prominent groups in the RESPP campaign more broadly. The

respondents range in age from 22 to 70 years old, with a median age of 33, and reside in 12 states across the US as well as the District of Columbia. Varying the respondent pool in terms of race and ethnicity proved to be more challenging, although three respondents who were included in the sample identified as non-White (one African-American, one Latino, and one Asian). The respondent pool was also fairly homogenous in terms of level of education; only 1 respondent did not report having a college degree, and 12 held postgraduate degrees. The majority described themselves as being more politically active than average (i.e. campaign volunteering, organizational work, etc.), although a few claimed to be relatively inactive in relation to their peers. The sample can thus be characterized as largely consisting of white, highly educated, fairly politically active gay men and straight women in their 20s and 30s, although a handful of other voices helped to diversify the sample to some degree. It is therefore not representative of the entire population of participants in the RESPP campaign. To an extent, it reflects the character of my own social network on Facebook, particularly in terms of being skewed towards users with high levels of education. Rather than being generalizable, the sample serves as a limited, albeit productive, window into the broader phenomenon of the RESPP campaign that is useful for concept development.

After establishing initial contact via Facebook, I conducted phone interviews with each respondent for approximately 45 minutes. The interview schedule included open-ended prompts such as “tell me the story of changing your Facebook profile picture to a red equal sign image” and “what do you think were your goals in changing your Facebook profile picture to a red equal sign image?” Respondents were also asked to describe their online and offline political activities more broadly, and to compare these activities to their participation in the RESPP campaign. In addition, frequent follow-up questions were used to allow respondents to elaborate on their experiences and viewpoints in considerable depth. Upon completion of the interviews, I read over the resulting transcripts multiple times and then used Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) grounded theory approach for analyzing qualitative data. Responses were first coded by category, and then grouped together into larger thematic categories that emerged organically from the data. While the theoretical framework outlined above offered sensitizing concepts that helped orient the analysis, the coding process also allowed for new conceptual categories to emerge.

The RESPP Campaign and Public Influence: Creating Visibility and Raising Awareness

When asked what motivated them to participate in the RESPP campaign, only a handful of the respondents (3 of 22) mentioned an interest in directly influencing the Supreme Court decisions on DOMA and Proposition 8. For instance, David was cautiously optimistic about such a possibility, remarking that “I would like to think that it had some impact on the decision of the Supreme Court, but I don’t know that for a fact.” However, this notion of the campaign as an informal petition aimed at the Supreme Court proved to be less popular overall among respondents than an alternative conceptual model of influence that focuses on targeting a variety of publics directly via Facebook. Mirroring Zuckerman’s (2012) argument about the type of civics fostered by internet culture, a cultural theory of change was generally favored over a legislative (or in this case, judicial) theory of change by the respondents.

For instance, a somewhat larger amount (9 of 22) cited an interest in persuading members of the public that do not support marriage equality to reconsider their position. Importantly, their rationales for how the campaign functioned persuasively tended to focus less on the specifics of the red equal sign graphic itself than on the act of adopting it as a visual manifestation of identity. By connecting their digital avatars on Facebook to the graphic, campaign participants made themselves conspicuously legible as marriage equality supporters, and respondents pointed to the cumulative effect of these self-labeling acts as central to the campaign’s persuasive power. According to this line of reasoning, the collective visual

representation of pro-marriage equality identities has the potential to alter perceptions of public opinion in such a way as to reorient social norms and compel others to follow suit (for an extended discussion of visibility as a strategy of political persuasion, see Penney, 2012). For instance, Chloe described that her goal

was to demonstrate to others how overwhelming, you know, with the volume of people that changed their profile pictures, how overwhelming in support in particular this sort of Facebook generation is on this issue ... when reasonable people who are against gay marriage see how many reasonable people are for it, I think that that changes their minds slowly over time.

Furthermore, some self-identified LGBT respondents (4 of 22 overall) described goals of impacting others' attitudes by digitally increasing their own LGBT visibility and putting a (virtual) human face on the issue of LGBT legal rights. As Jonathan put it,

I hope that my friends who are straight, or who don't really agree with me politically, would look at [the profile picture] and say "yeah, that [Supreme Court] decision affects Jonathan" ... Saying "this affects me" makes it a lot harder for somebody to get up and say "that's wrong, that should never happen." It changes the conversation and it changes the tone, if that same person says "that shouldn't happen except for Jonathan," or except for somebody else that they know who it's directly affecting.

As Jonathan's remarks suggest, the fact that social media platforms like Facebook connect people to their own friends whom they know and trust—and who thus may hold a particularly strong interpersonal influence over them depending upon the closeness of their relationship (see Bond et al, 2012)—helps account for how the campaign is conceptualized as effective political persuasion. A parallel idea was expressed by 2 respondents who emphasized the particular persuasive significance of making themselves visible as straight allies of the marriage equality movement. For instance, Peter explained that "if you have someone you really admire, and you don't know what they think about gay marriage, and you see them with a red equal sign, I think it can totally shift perceptions ... Who our friends are affects us, our behavior, our opinions." As the varying accounts of the respondents suggest, the strategic visibility message of the RESPP campaign was complex and multifaceted, with each new participant potentially adding layers of meaning by juxtaposing the message of the red equal sign graphic with the specificity of her or his own social identity. This point underlines Jenkins' (2009) argument that users who share media content across digital networks also help to shape it in the process, "often expanding potential meanings" as they actively and selectively engage in practices of circulation.

In addition to a strategic articulation of social visibility aimed at both interpersonal connections and the public at large, some noted how the visibility for LGBT people and allies achieved via the RESPP campaign also served a second purpose for the LGBT community specifically. For some respondents (5 of 22), one goal of participating was to heighten a sense of social support for LGBT people who may be struggling with their sexuality, thus lifting their morale and self-esteem. Here, the campaign is framed as a kind of public mental health outreach effort for at-risk LGBT youth, albeit one that also has political overtones due to the embattled status of this community within the broader society. Anastasia Khoo, the marketing director of the HRC who masterminded the RESPP campaign, notably emphasized this idea in her discussion of the campaign's outcomes: "I have to think that when isolated young people—those not out to their family or victims of bullying—saw the sea of red, they understood that they were supported

and accepted by a huge community of people” (Khoo, 2013a). Similarly, Mason had this to say about his goals in changing his profile picture:

I thought that there’s a lot of kids out there that are on Facebook, probably behind their parents back, and they need to know that they’re not alone, especially with the entire wave of suicides . . . You need to know that you have a community base, you need to know that there are people who support you.

Furthermore, Mason claimed to have had numerous conversations with LGBT youth on Facebook along these lines in direct response to his red equal sign profile picture, emphasizing his success in helping them to improve their feelings about their own sexual identities and feel part of a supportive LGBT community. Testimonials like those of Mason suggest that the HRC’s stated objective of using the campaign as intracommunity morale-boosting was indeed taken up by at least some of its participants. Importantly, this point suggests how the RESPP campaign took on a “civic culture” dimension for at least some of its participants, as the sharing of the pro-LGBT image worked to strengthen a collective identity among LGBT youth—a process that might have the potential to serve as a foundation for political mobilization in the future (i.e. Dahlgren, 2009; Bakardjieva, 2009; Mascheroni, 2013).

A further type of audience that a significant number of respondents (10 of 22) sought to reach with their profile pictures can be described as those who are simply not paying attention to LGBT rights issues in the first place. In contrast to the above-outlined framework of visibility as persuasive norm-setting, the respondents typically characterized their intentions in this context as educational, defining their activity as drawing attention to the issue rather than necessarily pushing a viewpoint. However, upon closer analysis, this notion of raising awareness can be understood as a more subtle but nonetheless persuasive gesture, as respondents described how informing their less-aware friends and acquaintances about the marriage equality issue could influence their level of support. For example, Kris told a story about how his participation in the RESPP campaign inspired a heterosexual friend to change her profile picture in turn, which he felt to be particularly significant:

She doesn’t have any gay friends except for me. And I got that she . . . not that she would have been opposed to it, but she wouldn’t have paid much attention. And then she did that. And what made me happy about her doing that is that means that the other people in her community saw that, and saw it’s something that’s actually worth looking at and a community worth supporting.

Thus, by grabbing the attention of people who were previously uninformed about the issue of marriage equality via a multistep process, Kris felt that his symbolic act on Facebook had the potential to push them towards a supportive position.

For Gianna, this strategic educational effort was reinforced by interactions she was able to have with her Facebook friends as a result of posting the profile picture. Gianna, who described her target audience as friends who “don’t pay enough attention to what’s happening in politics, and on the Supreme Court level,” claimed that she had success in using her red equal sign profile picture as a springboard for disseminating information about the marriage equality issue: “I did have a couple people who posted and were like, ‘why did you change your picture and what does it mean?’ And then you get the opportunity to send them a link or to tell them that, you know, this is going and that this is a milestone.” When one of her friends inquired about the meaning of her profile picture, she “sent a link back to the Human Rights Campaign, and they could read more information about it.” The fact that Gianna chose to direct

her friend to the advocacy group who launched the campaign (as opposed to a third-party news source) highlights how the goal of educating an uninformed public can blur with goals of persuasion.

However, like other respondents who claimed informational motives for participating in the campaign, Gianna emphasized a distinction between raising awareness about the issue among her Facebook connections and swaying them outright: "It's sort of a 'people should know what's going on' duty, as opposed to 'people should think this way or take this action.'" By seeking to tell people what to think *about* rather than what to think, these respondents pointed to an agenda-setting function (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), albeit one that is participatory and bottom-up in nature. While agenda-setting theory typically stresses the power of elites, such as professional journalists and public officials, to prioritize issues of public discourse and thus indirectly influence political outcomes, the participatory agenda-setting exemplified by the RESPP campaign suggests how many politically invested citizens use grassroots information circulation tools to gain entry into this process and help shape its course. Bucy and Gregson (2001) suggest the possibility of this sort of dynamic in their discussion of citizen-level media participation more broadly, noting that such activities can contribute to "the agenda-building process of public issue formation" (p. 376) that may indirectly shape long-term political outcomes (see also Sayre et al, 2010). By using their foothold in the digital public sphere to raise awareness about an issue that is important to them, participants in the RESPP campaign like Gianna and Kris thus attempted to democratize the subtly influential process of agenda-setting that has traditionally been the domain of top-down power brokers.

Whether or not this strategic awareness-raising effort paved the way to a shift in public attitudes about marriage equality, however, cannot be readily determined from these interviews. Similarly, it is difficult to assess the degree to which these campaign participants may have been successful in their more explicitly persuasive goals such as changing perceptions about the widespread presence of marriage equality supporters so as to reorient social norms and compel non-supporters to reconsider their positions. However, the two broad conceptual frameworks of visibility and awareness articulated by the respondents suggest conceivable mechanisms by which this sort of social media-driven campaign might be able to shape public opinion to some degree, helping to lend specificity to the body of theory that positions participatory symbolic action as a significant instrument of power in a strongly media-centered political sphere (i.e. Castells, 2007).

The RESPP Campaign in Broader Context: Grappling With the "Slacktivism" Critique

This optimism about the political impact of the RESPP campaign was not shared by all, however. Echoing the critiques of "slacktivism" that appeared in media commentaries following the launch of the campaign, 2 respondents expressed serious concerns about the campaign's capacity to affect change and questioned its role in larger LGBT activism efforts (interestingly, both were also critical of the HRC organization's politics more broadly and posted parody images of the red equal sign to register their disapproval, although space limitations prohibit an in-depth treatment of this critical parody activity here). For instance, Riley offered a pointed articulation of the above-noted substitution thesis (Christensen, 2011):

I was really kind of peeved that there wasn't actually any action being taken. These are folks who are activists in a sense that they'll post about things on the internet, but they won't be doing anything else ... it's a thing that people think they can do and then wash their hands of the issue."

However, Riley's assumption that participation in the RESPP campaign lowered one's commitment to other forms of activism was disputed by Mark, who expressed hope that the symbolic step of changing

one's profile picture for LGBT rights might inspire more concrete action down the line. A local leader in an organization fighting for marriage equality in his state, Mark explained that he saw the RESPP campaign as a recruitment strategy for getting those who are already sympathetic to the cause to become more involved in an organized fashion: "I hope it would inspire people to be active, to be part of it, to do something in the real world Hopefully it moves people up the chain of doing more, towards more effective participation and change."

This notion of symbolic action as motivating supporters to become more active in the organized marriage equality movement essentially reverses the substitution thesis. According to Mark's logic, rather than quit because they feel satisfied that they've already made a difference, those who take this symbolic step would feel more strongly identified with the cause and thus may be more likely to go further in their participation in the future. Indeed, Mark directly tied the idea of pushing supporters towards a deeper commitment to activism to the campaign's potential for strengthening a collective identity: "For me it was to show connection It was more like solidarity together." As he implied, this sort of community-building, while beneficial for strengthening social connections at a purely interpersonal level, also serves an instrumental purpose by potentially increasing the ranks of the organized marriage equality movement. Thus, Mark's comments suggest how the "civic culture" framework of collective identity-building as a precondition for future participation (Dahlgren, 2009; Mascheroni, 2013) is being explicitly embraced by political organizations as a recruitment strategy via branded marketing efforts.

Tellingly, this concept was stressed by the HRC's Khoo in statements about the organization's goals for launching the RESPP campaign. For Khoo, this symbolic expression of collective identification may be particularly instrumental in transforming heterosexual marriage equality supporters into organized activists:

For those people, this was the first step to becoming a straight ally, and now it's our job as advocates to help bring these individuals up the ladder of engagement so that the next time they receive an email from us, asking them to contact their legislator, they might do so Small steps add up. (Khoo, 2013b).

While at this point it is unclear if the HRC has actually been successful in reaching this recruitment goal through the RESPP campaign, such a notion of "the ladder of engagement" stands as a potentially powerful rejoinder to the substitution thesis lying at the heart of "slacktivism" critiques of symbolic political action. In other words, from the perspective of those who seek to build an organized movement, getting sympathetic individuals to outwardly express their identification via popular culture platforms may be empowering rather than enervating.

However, the interviews also suggest a third possibility, namely that symbolic action on social media has no causal relationship to other forms of political participation, and that people who are organizationally active as well as organizationally inactive tend to stay in place in terms of their commitment level when engaging in this activity. For those who were already involved in the organized marriage equality movement, the profile picture was described as an extra layer of participation that complemented rather than conflicted with their other activities. For example, David remarked that for him and his husband, participating in this sort of symbolic social media campaign is "one of many things we should be doing. Like in my personal case, you know, it's not the only thing that we were doing as a couple. We also were donating." As this anecdotal example suggests, a commitment-enervating sense of self-satisfaction was far from a universal experience for marriage equality activists who participated in the RESPP campaign.

While this theory positing no relationship between symbolic action and organizational engagement suggests that those who are already committed to the latter remain so despite their involvement in the

former, what about those who engage in media participation in as their only contribution to a cause? As an alternative to both the substitution and “ladder of engagement” models, some respondents (6 of 22) suggested how the RESPP campaign worked to expand the circle of participation in the marriage equality movement to include those who are unlikely to ever become active at an organized level. As Andrew put it, “I think that a lot of people who maybe engaged in it wouldn’t have done anything at all otherwise. And so to say ‘oh, you know, it’s not enough, it’s not good enough’ ... they’re not under an obligation to do anything at all.”

This notion of expanding participation to a new swath of the public was further supported by the testimony of Evelyn, who remarked that with regard to the issue of marriage equality, “I would never sign a petition, I would never march in the streets, but I could put up this equal sign and show everybody that I agree.” Evelyn’s symbolic action on her Facebook page thus marked the first time that she has ever become involved in the issue, and while this may be the furthest she was willing to go, her comments suggest that she would have remained wholly inactive if it were not for the RESPP campaign. Thus, for those like Evelyn who had no previous involvement in the marriage equality movement and had no plans to participate at an organized level in the future, the campaign provided an opportunity to at the very least contribute to strategic visibility and awareness efforts (in addition to gaining the social and psychological rewards of media participation more broadly, such as enhanced social status and increased feelings of efficacy [Bucy & Gregson, 2001]). Such an outcome would seemingly fall short of the hopes of the HRC’s Khoo and other movement organizers to push these new entrants up “the ladder of engagement” in the future. However, if there is indeed any macrolevel persuasive efficacy to be found in the strategic coordinated production of visibility and awareness, this would suggest how such a movement would stand to benefit by broadening its scope to include purely symbolic media participants as well as those who are also organizationally engaged.

Of course, such reasoning assumes that the substitution thesis is wholly incorrect. While this remains a possibility, the interviews largely support Christensen’s (2011) assertion that “there is no evidence of the substitution thesis” in terms of how media participation around political issues relates to other forms of activism. Notably, not a single respondent indicated that they opted not to pursue further action regarding the marriage equality issue because they felt they had done enough by changing their Facebook profile picture. Rather, their accounts suggested that they would largely remain at their current level of organized commitment regardless of what they had posted on their Facebook profile pages. Although the “ladder of engagement” model may be overly optimistic, the HRC and other political groups might take solace in the fact that this sort of symbolic action did not appear to dissuade respondents from continuing their organizational commitments. As Mason put it rather bluntly about changing his profile picture, “Do I think it’s going to be valuable? Like a drop in the ocean. There needs to be action, not just voice. ‘Action speaks louder than words’ is an old phrase for a reason.”

Conclusion

While the precise cultural and political effects of symbolic action on popular social networking platforms are far from being fully understood, this study attempts to move the scholarship forward by empirically exploring the subjective experiences, motivations, and conceptual frameworks of real-life participants in an exemplary campaign. With regard to RQ1, a significant portion of respondents claimed motivations of influencing various sectors of the Facebook-connected public by posting a red equal sign profile picture, and furthermore conceptualized this influence in terms of two broad themes: creating visibility for marriage equality supporters (including LGBT persons) as a means of compelling sympathy and strategically modeling social norms, and raising awareness about the issue as a means of setting the public

agenda. With regard to RQ2, a significant portion also pointed to goals of helping to strengthen a collective identity around support for marriage equality and LGBT rights. Together, these findings suggest that participation in the RESPP campaign involved a complex web of overlapping motivations that cannot be reduced to a single formula.

In relation to RQ3, the respondents offered a range of insights regarding the relationship between symbolic action on social media and more traditional forms of political participation. Previous debates regarding this relationship have suggested a binary between the empowering, up-the-ladder foundation-laying of “civic culture” engagement that strengthens collective identity (Dahlgren, 2009; Bakerjewa, 2009; Mascheroni, 2013) and the disempowering, down-the-ladder substitution of “slacktivism” (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). The exploratory interviews collected for this study provide some evidence to support the former (particularly in terms of building an identity-focused political movement such as the struggle for LGBT legal rights), and comparatively little to support the latter (except as a fear of how unknown others may behave). However, a third model suggested by the data posits no relationship between symbolic action and organizational political activity, rejecting the ladder metaphor altogether. According to this model, symbolic campaigns provide political organizations with opportunities to expand their base beyond traditional members to include a broader layer of supporters whose participation is purely media-based, while keeping in place (i.e. not threatening to substitute for) other forms of participation that require higher levels of commitment. In other words, committed activists remain committed despite adding new forms of symbolic labor to their repertoire, while sympathetic citizens who would not otherwise take on organizational commitments are brought into the circle of participation by making microlevel contributions to aggregate projects of mediated public advocacy. Future research may therefore benefit from developing and testing this model with more generalizable methods, helping to move the scholarship towards a grounded understanding of the role of online media participation in contemporary activism. In addition, future research mapping the individual-level psychological benefits that flow from social media-based symbolic action, such as gaining social status and feelings of personal political efficacy (see Bucy & Gregson, 2001), would help to provide a fuller account of its impact that expands beyond the macrolevel concerns of political organizations and activists.

At the same time, future research that is better equipped to measure the persuasive effects of symbolic campaigns on social media platforms—which may indeed becoming an increasingly instrumental form of participation in a political sphere shaped by the centrality of media discourse (i.e. Castells, 2007) and a corresponding “cultural theory of change” approach to contemporary civics (Zuckerman, 2012)—would benefit by focusing on the nuanced logics of visibility and awareness suggested by the respondents’ accounts. While the notion of mediated visibility (in this case, personalized visibility created via networked digital media) as a means of fostering social acceptance of certain groups may be particularly pertinent for LGBT issues, this model of visually articulating political identities via conspicuous self-labeling is increasingly relevant for a wide range of constituencies (see Penney, 2012). Considering that networked digital media multiply opportunities for citizens to publicly display their political identities and attachments—the profile picture being perhaps the most germane example—this sort of visibility tactic is likely to proliferate in a range of political persuasion efforts.

In a parallel fashion, the use of “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2007, p. 248) to raise awareness about the issues one cares about amongst an inattentive public should also be explored in further depth as an advocacy strategy that is specifically fostered and intensified in spaces of social media discourse. Sayre et al. (2010) observe this pattern in their study of agenda setting in the digital age, noting how citizens who are unsatisfied with mainstream media reporting may take to social media to create their own “coverage” as an act of issue advocacy and protest. As the case study of the RESPP suggests, even a symbolic action with little informational content may be relevant in this participatory agenda-setting process, as images have the capacity to spark conversations that engage the issue in more depth.

In the contexts of both raising awareness and increasing visibility, the persuasive character of online symbolic campaigns is multilayered, hinging upon the wide range of target audiences that may come into contact with the symbolic content as well as the varying social positions of those who post it and juxtapose it with the specificity of their own identities. Thus, it would be a mistake to think of one RESPP campaign with one message or one political or cultural effect. Rather, many campaigns with multiple and overlapping agendas emerged from the HRC's initial tactic of calling on supporters to change their profile pictures to a red equal sign image—some of which coincided with the organization's stated goals of strengthening the LGBT youth community and encouraging supporters to move up “the ladder of engagement” (Khoo, 2013a; 2013b), and some of which branched off in other directions. As Jenkins (2009) stresses in his work on “spreadable media,” each individual act of digital circulation creates new layers of meaning as well as new pathways of communication. Scholars who seek to gauge the significance of future online “connective actions” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) would improve their understanding by adopting this expansive perspective, as well as by considering how civic identity-building may work in tandem with strategic public advocacy efforts in the complex networked circuits of a multimodal internet.

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